

★ CURRENT MEMBERS ★

## *Shelley Berkley*

*1951–*

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM NEVADA

*1999–*



Image courtesy of the Member

**SHELLEY BERKLEY, A FORMER NEVADA STATE LEGISLATOR** with long ties to Las Vegas, won election as Representative in one of the nation's fastest-growing congressional districts. During her first terms in office, Congresswoman Berkley led the opposition to the federal government's plan to ship the nation's nuclear waste to a centralized site in Nevada.

She was born Rochelle Levine in New York City on January 20, 1951. Her parents moved the family to Las Vegas when she was 11. After graduating from Valley High School, she became the first member of her family to attend college, earning a B.A. from the University of Nevada–Las Vegas in 1972 and a J.D. from the University of San Diego Law School in 1976. She married and raised two sons, Max and Sam. In March 1999, she remarried, to Dr. Larry Lehrner, and gained two stepchildren, Stephanie and David. Berkley had wide experience in the private sector, including employment as vice president for government and legal affairs for a major Las Vegas resort. She also chaired the board of the Nevada Hotel and Motel Association. Berkley was elected to the Nevada state assembly in 1982 and served until 1985. She also was appointed to the board of regents of the university and community college system of Nevada in 1990 and then elected to a six-year term ending in 1998.

When Nevada Representative John Ensign relinquished his Las Vegas House seat in 1998 to run for the U.S. Senate, Berkley entered the open seat contest. Berkley narrowly defeated Republican Don Chairez and, in 2000, was re-elected by an eight-point margin over Republican Jon Porter, 52 to 44 percent. In subsequent elections, Berkley faced a unique challenge—trying to keep name recognition among a rapidly growing constituency (by 2001, Las Vegas was absorbing more than 6,000 new residents per month).<sup>1</sup> By 2004, she had secured her position in the Democratic-leaning district, convincingly defeating her GOP challenger by 35 percentage points.<sup>2</sup>

As a freshman in the 106th Congress (1999–2001), Berkley was assigned to three committees: Transportation and Infrastructure, Veterans' Affairs, and Small Business. During the 106th Congress, colleagues elected Berkley vice president of the Democratic freshman class. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003) she exchanged her Small Business assignment for a seat on the International Relations Committee, where she sits on the Middle East and Central Asia and Europe and Emerging Threats subcommittees. Berkley has served as a Regional Whip since the 107th Congress. In the 109th Congress (2005–2007), Berkley was appointed Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs on the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Berkley, who bills herself as a moderate, joined the centrist New Democratic Coalition. Shortly after her election, she advocated expanding health care coverage to cover the costs associated with bone mass measurements, a procedure important for women susceptible to osteoporosis. In 2001, she sponsored a bill with Republican Patrick Toomey of Pennsylvania to curtail the power of Medicare administrators to cut off payments to health care providers, while also allowing those charged with improper billing to challenge such rulings.<sup>3</sup> Like many western state politicians from both parties, Berkley opposed additional gun control while supporting several gun safety measures.

As the Representative for the nation's fastest-growing congressional district, much of Berkley's focus was local—on water controls and “protecting my major industry” of gambling and entertainment.<sup>4</sup> Berkley has sought to increase federal funding for highways, other transportation projects, and school construction. Additionally, she advocates increased use of Nevada's federal lands for renewable energy development.

Berkley also emerged as a leader on the state's hot-button political issue: opposition to a federal plan to place radioactive nuclear waste from 42 states at Yucca Mountain, about 90 miles northwest of her Las Vegas district. Berkley led the Nevada delegation in laying out several arguments against the proposal: The geographically unstable mountain was prone to earthquakes; it sat atop an underground flood zone; trains transporting the waste were prone to accident or terrorist attacks; and the project was a “financial boon-doggle,” costing much more than was appropriated.<sup>5</sup> “Nevada does not produce one ounce of nuclear waste,” Berkley said in the spring of 2002 when the measure came to a vote. “Yet Nevada is being asked to carry the burdens of a problem it had no part in creating.”<sup>6</sup> The House passed the measure 306–117. After it passed the Senate and was signed into law by President George W. Bush, Berkley vowed to fight the measure in the courts.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, “Shelley Berkley,”  
<http://bioguide.congress.gov>

## NOTES

- 1 William Booth, “In Las Vegas Area Contest, All Bets on a Win Are Off; Ever-Changing Voter Population Means Names and Issues Don't Stick Easily,” 23 October 2000, *Washington Post*: A13; see also, George F. Will, “In Vegas Politics, All Bets Are Off,” 12 May 2002, *Washington Post*: B7; “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 2 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 3 *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 621.
- 4 Edward Walsh, “Vote on House ‘Managers’ Draws Out Differences Among Freshmen,” 7 January 1999, *Washington Post*: A8.
- 5 Matthew L. Wald, “House Panel Backs Nevada as Site to Bury Atomic Waste,” 26 April 2002, *New York Times*: A26; *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (8 May 2002): 2180.
- 6 Nick Anderson, “House Backs Nuclear Dump Site,” 9 May 2002, *Los Angeles Times*: A13.